

The Question of Sovereignty Is Everything in Estonia

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TALLINN, Estonia, March 16 — Forty-nine years after Soviet soldiers exiled his family to Siberia, a gray-haired man named Lennart Meri moved back toward his boyhood, stepping to the blackboard at Public School No. 10 to chalk up the word "sovereignty."

"I knew that my time would come," Mr. Meri said of the sheer satisfaction of writing that word in Estonian for a class of Estonian teen-agers sitting where he once sat, trying to understand all that is at stake this weekend as voters approach the republic's polls as if they were ramparts.

Debate Over Sovereignty

Estonians are to vote for a new Parliament on Sunday and sovereignty is what the candidates have been debating — sovereignty regained, which Estonian nationalist candidates like Mr. Meri are promising, and sovereignty rampant, which Russian minority candidates are warning looms as a form of political servitude for their tense neighborhoods.

"They will have to use oppression or worse to oust us from the republic," vowed Oleg Morozov, a candidate across town in the Russian community. He was campaigning at Public School No. 33, where voters have been turning out anxiously with the goal of rebounding against the independence campaign that Estonian nationalists have maintained with considerable skill for the past two years.

That campaign took a fascinating turn this week in Moscow when President Mikhail S. Gorbachev offered conflicting signals about how he might deal with the campaigns to restore in-

dependence to the Baltic nations here and in Lithuania and Latvia.

On the one hand, the Soviet leader made a Kremlin show of rebuffing the Lithuanian Parliament's vote to secede from the Soviet Union. On the other hand, he conferred with Estonian leaders who stopped short of a similar secession challenge, and they asserted that as a consequence he is committed to some sort of negotiations over their craving for independence.

"What the Lithuanians have done is not a wise course of action, only an emotional statement," said Endel Lippmaa, a leader of the Estonian separatist movement and a member of the national Congress of People's Deputies.

"We did not want to paint ourselves into the same corner," he said, referring to the complex process of having to break Soviet ties carefully, piece by piece, not in some single rupture, however dramatic. "And we don't need any more declarations on this matter," he said, noting that the departing Estonian Parliament voted on Feb. 23 in favor of national independence by a vote of 194 to 14 with 18 abstentions.

Mr. Lippmaa and other Estonian politicians concede that the Russian minority's increase in numbers will probably mean a net gain for them in the voting on Sunday, perhaps doubling their standing to about 20 percent of the chamber.

Majority Fervor

But the independence movement is already well launched by large-scale majority fervor. The critical element now is that Estonians use Lithuania to draw a contrast and demonstrate to Mr. Gorbachev that it can be done "in a reasonable way," according to Mr.

Lippmaa's strategy. He hopes for the first signs of progress in the next two to three weeks, behind the scenes, he stresses, nothing flashy.

He may have been heartened by the Kremlin's announcement today that President Gorbachev had instructed the Lithuanian authorities to respond in three days to the demand by the Congress of People's Deputies that their independence declaration be retracted. The Lithuanian authorities treated the Kremlin cable as a request from a peer nation to be taken under advisement.

The Estonian attempt to negotiate the issue will be watched closely in other republics like Georgia where the Parliament voted a week ago to denounce the republic's incorporation into the Soviet Union six decades ago as illegal and to demand negotiations for independence.

"There should be no diktat of one nation toward another," said Mr. Morozov, the Russian community candidate. He was speaking not of any Moscow-republic confrontation but of local fears that independent Estonians will dictate unjust conditions for Russians like himself who were born here and consider themselves Estonians. They cite measures giving Estonian primacy as the republic's language, and they express particular concern over a recent unofficial pro-independence congress of Estonians that pointedly excluded Russians.

An Estonian Offers Reassurance

"Oh, no, that's absurd," Mr. Meri, the Estonian candidate, said in a separate interview of fears that the independence drive has a vindictive edge. "Russians simply must believe that Stalinist behavior has ended."

He referred to Stalin's move 50 years



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Estonian separatists are wary of challenging Moscow.

ago, forcibly annexing independent Estonia. They began a deportation and colonialization program that has seen the basic Estonian population reduced to about 60 percent of the 1.5 million citizens.

The intensity of this shift can be sensed in the increasing polarity of the political campaign here, an intensity that is itself alarming to some ordinary voters.

"We should not be accusing each other this way," said Svetlana Gaichanova, a teacher who listened for a while at the Public School No. 10 meeting. She said the politicians may be in danger of missing the point that the critical challenge focused not on past national history so much as on the individual's outlook. "What is my future going to be?"